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THE WENDS OF TEXAS; The smallest ethnic group of all

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Serbin, Texas

This little historical fragment -- or one quite similar to it -- buried in an obscure tome on Texas folklore, caught Sylvia Grider's eye one afternoon while she was browsing. And it made her stop short.

"I had thought I was a pretty well-versed folklorist, especially in Texas cultures," she recalls, "but I had certainly never heard of any immigrant group called the Wends."

Neither had most other people.

The Wends of Texas hold the twin distinctions of being one of the least-known ethnic groups in America and one of the smallest (Miss Grider estimates direct Wendish descendants in America at about 10,000 -- a figure many Wends think too low).They are simply too tiny a culture to register on anyone's ethnographic map of the United States.

One of the oldest Texas cultures, the Wends arrived here right after the Republic of Texas became a state. According to an old article in the Houston Chronicle -- one of the few you'll find on the Wends, anywhere -- they are "a very ancient

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Slavic people [who were] conquered by the Prussians in 1167 but resisted assimilation."

According to a pamphlet by Ron Lammert, a Wendish descendant, their ancestors were a group of Slavic tribes who occupied much of central Europe in the 10th century. But by the 19th century the Wends had been so reduced by conquest and assimilation that "only a small area along the River Spree was inhabited by true Wends.

"Prussian agrarian reform laws of 1832 had dispossessed the Wends of their property. . . . But most intolerable was the requirement that the Lutheran Wends join the Evangelical Reform churches in one state-regulated Protestant body."

When they arrived here in Serbin, Texas, the Wends organized a church and 14 years later, in 1868, built an edifice. Today, the church is usually filled with the spiritual and literal descendants of the original band of 588 Wends.

Outside this small circle and a handful of professors, the Wends are practically unknown in America. But even if no one else was acquainted with them, Sylvia Grider was determined to find out who they were.

A smallish, young woman who wears jeans and a belt buckle inscribed "Success comes to those who hustle wisely," she sits in a small-town Texas luncheonette, explaining her adventures in discovering the Wends of Texas.

"The origin of the Wends gets into folklore and oral tradition that goes back to tribal migrations at the time of Julius Caesar," she says."They had a language, but no political identity. They were ghettoized within the German culture, like the Jews." And they left little historical record to help study their culture.

"But I hit pay dirt. I was just 60 miles away from the Wends," Miss Grider observes. She also "hit pay dirt" by being given a university grant to go into Wendish country and do what folklorists get paid to do: study the folk.

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"Folklorists are in the discipline that studies traditions wherever we can find them," observes Miss Grider, who has a PhD in folklore. "We're supposed to be cultural geologists and anthropologists and linguists."

Wendish country is about halfway between Austin and Houston in east central Texas, a small triangle of land between Serbin, Warda, and Giddings. (Warda is really two abandoned houses, one general store, one lived-in house. It used to be an active place, but the population shifted when the railroad went through nearby Giddings. Other towns in the vicinity have names like Dime Box and Westchester.) It's all neatly contained in an area that is hard by Texas A & M University, where Miss Grider works in the graduate department.

Apparently Miss Grider -- who sniffs that "social scientists aren't supposed to become friendly with the people we study" -- must have broken a cardinal rule of the discipline during her stay in Wendish country. For, after we leave the luncheonette and drive to the home of the retired Wendish couple who put her up during her "ethnographic fieldwork," she is smothered in hugs and kisses before we even make it to the door.

She is obviously a member of the family.

And a venerable family it is. Alvin Schmidt is a direct descendant of pioneers who came over on the Ben Nevis and walked -- yes, walkedm -- halfway across Texas carrying their belongings on their backs or dragging them along the ground.

Mr. Schmidt, a large-boned, friendly man who looks as though he comes from good peasant stock, hunts around his impeccably kept home for a history of his ancestors (convinced that his wife, Esther, or someone else has hidden it from him), while she shows us some of the largest hydrangeas I have ever seen, as well as other legendarily proportioned blossoms she has grown around her yard. (The Wends have always been avid gardeners and lovers of trees.)

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Finally coming up with his book, a genealogy of the Schmidt family, Mr. Schmidt pages back through the generations to the original Wendish settlers of this region. They are depicted in photographs and drawings, these first few generations, stocky, square-faced people, not unlike Alvin Schmidt himself, who look decent, hardworking, and earthy.

The book traces each succeeding generation of Schmidts down to the present, although without pictures. But Mr. Schmidt carries many of these pictures in his mind.

"A lot of the ones who came over were serfs," he says in an accent that curiously mixes Texas drawl with Slavic lilt. "My grandmother had a 'sheena' that they used in those days. It was a 4-foot-by-3-foot-by-1-foot trunk that held all their clothes and possessions. And it was all painted and decorated.

"They landed in Galveston and got as far as Sealy [just outside Houston], where they stopped to work. Then they traveled west to the current Wendish country. They built log cabins to live in. It was a hard life. Anyway, the pastor had bought a piece of land, too, and they just settled."

The pastor that he refers to is a legendary figure among the Wends. Johann Killian's handsomely stern portrait stares out from every Wendish landmark, along with a painting of the storm-tossed Ben Nevis (named for Scotland's highest mountain apparently because it was built in a Scottish shipyard). They are what Miss Grider calls the two "culture icons" of the Wends.

The original Wends who emigrated to Texas left their homeland in a tiny piece of what is now East Germany, near the Czech border, to escape oppression by their German neighbors. There, the Wends were considered lower-class, were allowed to perform only menial jobs, and were even ordered to discontinue use of their own language.

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Whether they left because of economic hardship, for religious freedom, or to use their own language is unclear. What is certain is that, after centuries during which the Wendish folk had been buffeted and overrun by Germanic tribes and empires, a small band of them bolted for freedom -- some to Australia and some to America -- in an "epic migration [that] ended on the banks of Rabbs Creek in what is today Lee County, near Giddings," according to the pamphlet by Ron Lammert. "Here the Wends purchased a league of land for 50 cents an acre."

"What often happens to immigrants in new cultures who face bleak lives," Miss Grider comments, "is that the oral tradition of their past is replaced by hardship stories." And that certainly is the way it was for the Texas Wends.

The Wendish emigrants followed the old custom of wearing black wedding dresses -- to remind them of the hardships of married life -- and with good reason: The brief life spans carved into the tilting stones of their cemeteries testify to the rigors of pioneer living.

Those who arrived in America abandoned much of their distinctive heritage. "They weren't interested in preserving Wendishness," Evelyn Kasper, a Wendish descendant, explains. "They didn't even pass the language on."

No folk songs, no folk dances, no folk tales. Little, in fact, other than the single element, besides common language, that bound them together in the first place: the form of worship that is preserved today in a church built by the original settlers and attended by their 300 spiritual and literal descendants here in Texas.

Miss Grider and I come to this historical site by way of an adjacent picnic grounds under some tall pines, where we are to meet Mrs. Kasper, a prominent member of the Wendish Heritage Society. Just across the picnic grounds is a corner of land with an old wooden building sitting on movers' blocks and a sign that proclaims, "Site of the museum of the Texas Wends."

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Evelyn Kasper is an energetic, communicative woman with the strong-framed countenance you see in so many of the Wendish folk. Standing under the pines, with the wind cutting whistles in the air, she fixes cheese and homemade-bread sandwiches and talks about the Wends and their heritage.

"Peter Fritzsche was my great-grandfather, a stonemason," she says. "He came over on the Ben Nevis. His wife and daughter died on the way over of cholera. But his wife had already had a baby on board ship. He remarried and had 10 other children, after having 5 with his first wife."

Unlike most of the Wends, Peter Fritzsche never changed his name, except to drop the "z" in the middle. Wendish patronyms are distinguished by a cluster of consonants, such as Ben Tschatschula or the less tortuous Pietsch and Lorentschk. The names are scattered among the tombstones in the cemetery between the picnic grounds and the church.

"They came from a cooler, more temperate landscape and got hostile, infertile land. The soil would not prosper traditional crops," Mrs. Kasper explains, adding that they had to develop trades, new farming skills, and ways of staying alive through harsh winters.

There, among the tombstones, we come across a cluster of graves from the Killian family, which spawned at least two pastors, including the legendary Rev. Johann Killian (1811-84), the spiritual leader of the original Texas Wends.

Mr. Killian, a handsome, white-haired man with striking, round eyes, was, according to Lammert, "a scholar and prolific writer who translated from German into Wendish many books such as Luther's Large Catechism and the Augsburg Confession. He also wrote Wendish prayer books, sermons, tracts, as well as hymns and poems. . . . Rev. Killian was also known to preach the same sermon in Wendish, German, and English on a Sunday morning."

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Whatever the austerity of their pioneer life, the church the Wends built is no drab, solemn sanctuary. The pillars are covered with feather-painting, some of it done by the original Wends, to make them look like marble. Original hand carving by local craftsmen handsomely adorns the pews. Beautiful, ornate organ pipes in blue, gold, and white are behind the altar, above an Alleluia! altar cloth.

Standing here in their church in Serbin, you feel the religious determination and solid resolve that kept them together and sustained them through their struggles.

Today, the congregation, almost 95 percent of it Wendish, still maintains this church in the midst of a rekindling interest among Wends in their own Wendishness. People who, as children, passed a thousand times between the paintings of the Ben Nevis and of Mr. Killian are taking a sudden interest in these archetypal figures and the history they represent.

The Wendish Heritage Society is building up archives and constructing a museum out of the old two-room schoolhouse, which until last year accommodated eight grades. It's the only Wendish school outside East Germany (where the communist government has made some symbolic importance of the Wends and their history of persecution), and people like Evelyn Kasper are rummaging through their possessions to find faded photographs of determined, solemn, square-jawed folk who look as if they had their hands full finding a new life, but who also evoke images of strong family ties and homespun virtues.

Johann Killian would have been pleased.

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